Strategic Silence and the Fractured Empire: USS *Liberty*, NUMEC, Vietnam, and the American Unraveling of 1967–1968

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The years 1967 and 1968 exposed the deep fissures in America's postwar image as both a moral leader and an unassailable superpower. Abroad, the United States fought to maintain its Cold War position while concealing events that undermined its credibility. The attack on the USS *Liberty* by Israeli forces—killing 34 American servicemen—was officially explained as a mistake, yet intelligence evidence suggested otherwise, and the Johnson administration chose silence over confrontation. At the same time, the NUMEC affair revealed that hundreds of pounds of weapons-grade uranium had likely been diverted to Israel, a violation the U.S. refused to acknowledge publicly to preserve alliance stability. Domestically, the Tet Offensive shattered the illusion of victory in Vietnam, while race riots from Watts to Detroit exposed the depth of internal fracture. Together, these crises formed a single pattern: truth was repeatedly sacrificed to maintain the appearance of control. This "strategic silence" became not an aberration, but a doctrine—one that revealed a nation struggling to reconcile its ideals with the contradictions of empire.

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Abstract

Between 1967 and 1968, the United States stood at the crossroads of empire, deception, and internal collapse. Abroad, the Cold War demanded unwavering demonstrations of strength, even as the reality of Vietnam's unwinnable quagmire eroded public trust. The Tet Offensive in early 1968 exposed the fragility of official narratives, just as major urban uprisings—from Watts to Detroit—revealed deep fractures in the social contract at home. Against this backdrop, two interlinked crises unfolded largely beyond public scrutiny: the June 1967 Israeli attack on the USS *Liberty*, killing 34 Americans, and the NUMEC affair, in which hundreds of pounds of weapons-grade uranium likely found their way to Israel's undeclared nuclear weapons program. Both events confronted U.S. leadership with evidence of allied betrayal. Yet in each case, the Johnson and later Nixon administrations chose deliberate suppression over exposure, subordinating truth to alliance maintenance and containment strategy. This article argues that such choices were not anomalies but manifestations of a consolidated doctrine of strategic silence—a governing reflex that treated truth as expendable in service of imperial coherence, even at the cost of justice, accountability, and the nation's moral core.

I. Introduction: A Year of Cracks in the Empire

In the two decades following World War II, the United States projected an image of unshakable power and moral leadership. Victorious in the greatest conflict of the modern era, architect of the United Nations, and guarantor of a new international order, it appeared to be the indispensable nation—invincible in war, prosperous in peace, and unified at home. This was the mirage of postwar American invincibility: a carefully cultivated belief that the American system was uniquely capable of marrying military dominance with democratic virtue.

Yet by the late 1960s, this narrative was beginning to fracture. The years 1967–1968 marked a convergence of crises that exposed contradictions too deep to be explained away by Cold War rhetoric. Abroad, the Vietnam War was bleeding lives and legitimacy; the Tet Offensive would soon obliterate official claims of imminent

victory. At home, racial unrest erupted into full-scale uprisings, challenging the myth of domestic harmony. Simultaneously, hidden crises tested the very fabric of U.S. alliances: the Israeli attack on the USS *Liberty*, and the suspected diversion of nuclear materials from NUMEC to Israel's clandestine weapons program.

These two episodes—one an act of violence against an American naval vessel, the other a theft of fissile material with existential implications—reveal a deeper pattern. In each case, Washington chose silence over confrontation, concealing uncomfortable truths from its own people. This was not mere political expedience; it was the emergence of a doctrine of strategic silence, a readiness to suppress evidence of betrayal in order to preserve the illusion of coherence in both foreign and domestic policy. The *Liberty* and NUMEC affairs serve as case studies in how an empire, facing multiple fronts of instability, sacrifices transparency for control.

II. USS *Liberty*: Sacrificing the Ally Within

On June 8, 1967, during the fourth day of the Six-Day War, the USS *Liberty*, a U.S. Navy technical research ship operating in international waters off the Sinai Peninsula, came under sustained attack by Israeli forces. The assault began with unmarked aircraft strafing the vessel with rockets and cannon fire, followed by napalm runs and culminating in torpedo strikes from Israeli motorboats. Thirty-four American sailors were killed and 171 wounded—over two-thirds of the crew. The attack crippled the ship's communications and left it listing heavily, yet it did not sink. Survivors managed to send distress calls, prompting U.S. carrier-based aircraft to launch—only to be recalled under direct orders from Washington.

Israel's official explanation was swift: a tragic case of mistaken identity, claiming the *Liberty* had been misidentified as an Egyptian horse transport ship. Yet declassified U.S. intelligence reports, intercepted communications, and navigational records strongly contradicted this account. The *Liberty* was flying a large American flag in clear weather, and reconnaissance had been conducted on it earlier that morning. Analysts within the National Security Agency and the CIA

concluded that the attack was almost certainly deliberate, though their assessments were quietly classified and shelved.

Survivor testimony painted a harrowing picture of intent. Crew members recalled the precision of the strikes, the targeting of communications equipment, and even attacks on life rafts—actions inconsistent with the chaos of a mistaken engagement. Despite these accounts, official inquiries were narrowly scoped. The hastily convened Navy Court of Inquiry avoided assigning blame and excluded much of the crew's testimony. The final report affirmed the Israeli account without testing its plausibility.

President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration chose silence for reasons rooted in geopolitical calculation. The Six-Day War had drastically shifted the balance of power in the Middle East, with Israel emerging as a strategic bulwark against Soviet-aligned Arab states. Publicly confronting Israel risked fracturing this alliance, undermining U.S. influence in the region, and complicating Cold War priorities. Domestic political realities also weighed heavily: Johnson was acutely aware of Israel's growing support network in Congress and the potential political costs of an open rupture.

The result was a deliberate suppression of truth. The *Liberty* crew, sworn to secrecy, became casualties not only of the attack but of a policy that placed alliance preservation above justice. In this light, the *Liberty* affair was not an anomaly but an early warning of a governing reflex that would resurface in other crises—among them, the NUMEC affair—where inconvenient truths were sacrificed to maintain the appearance of strategic coherence.

III. The NUMEC Affair: Uranium, Zionism, and Denial

In the small industrial town of Apollo, Pennsylvania, the Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corporation (NUMEC) operated as one of America's key suppliers of nuclear fuel during the early years of the atomic age. Founded in 1957 by metallurgist Dr. Zalman Shapiro, a committed Zionist and prominent member of pro-Israel organizations, NUMEC maintained contracts with the U.S. Navy and the

Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) to process and fabricate enriched uranium. By the mid-1960s, the facility had become a quiet node in the nation's civilian and military nuclear supply chain.

But by 1965, AEC inspectors began reporting alarming "material unaccounted for" (MUF) losses—hundreds of pounds of highly enriched uranium (HEU), far beyond the margin of error for industrial operations. By 1968, internal estimates suggested that more than 200 pounds of weapons-grade uranium—enough for several implosion-type nuclear warheads—had vanished. The CIA, FBI, and later the Nuclear Regulatory Commission all developed growing suspicions that the missing uranium had been diverted to Israel's clandestine nuclear weapons program at Dimona. These suspicions were bolstered by reports that Israeli nuclear officials, including intelligence operative Rafi Eitan, had visited the NUMEC plant under dubious pretenses.

Inside the intelligence community, the evidence accumulated quietly. CIA Director Richard Helms would later admit to the NRC that the agency "did not rule out" the diversion, a phrase that understated how seriously it was considered. Yet the matter never reached the level of a criminal prosecution or formal diplomatic confrontation. This was due in part to the doctrine of strategic ambiguity—Washington's tacit agreement with Israel not to publicly acknowledge its possession of nuclear weapons. The U.S. was simultaneously the chief architect of global nonproliferation norms under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), yet here it faced a glaring contradiction: confronting Israel over NUMEC would mean admitting that a U.S. ally had violated the very principles America claimed to enforce.

The political calculus for containment was complex. Domestically, exposing the diversion would have triggered a political firestorm, risking backlash from Israel's supporters in Congress and alienating a powerful constituency ahead of the 1968 election cycle. Internationally, it would have forced a rupture with a newly victorious Israeli state whose 1967 military triumph had dramatically shifted the Middle East's balance of power in Washington's favor. The Johnson

administration—and later the Nixon administration—judged that maintaining the alliance outweighed enforcing nuclear safeguards.

Thus, like the USS *Liberty* affair, NUMEC became another example of truth buried under Cold War expediency. The decision not to act decisively was not merely a bureaucratic failure; it reflected a structural willingness to trade transparency for geopolitical advantage. The theft of uranium from Apollo was not treated as a national security crisis but as a diplomatic inconvenience—one more contradiction folded into the empire's growing reliance on strategic silence.

IV. Vietnam: Strategic Failure and the Collapse of Trust

By early 1968, the United States had already poured hundreds of thousands of troops and billions of dollars into the Vietnam War, confident—at least in public—that victory was within reach. Official statements from the Johnson administration and senior military leaders reinforced this belief, framing the conflict as a slow but inevitable containment of communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Yet this carefully cultivated optimism collapsed in a single moment: the Tet Offensive.

Launched in late January 1968 by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army, the coordinated assaults struck more than 100 cities and outposts across South Vietnam, including the U.S. Embassy compound in Saigon. Militarily, Tet was a tactical defeat for the communists, but its psychological impact in the United States was devastating. The sheer scale and audacity of the attacks shredded the official narrative that the war was being won. Public confidence in the government's credibility plummeted, and the credibility gap—already widening—became an unbridgeable chasm.

The release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 would later confirm what many Americans had come to suspect in 1968: that successive administrations had misrepresented the scope, strategy, and prospects of the war. The documents revealed a pattern of internal recognition that the war was unwinnable, even as public assurances projected steady progress. This institutionalized deception was

not an aberration of wartime propaganda—it was the normalization of governing through managed truth, calibrated for political survival.

The parallels to the USS *Liberty* and NUMEC cover-ups are stark. In each case, inconvenient facts—whether a deliberate attack by an ally, the diversion of nuclear material, or the deteriorating reality in Vietnam—were contained, reframed, or buried to preserve the appearance of control. In all three, truth was treated not as a democratic obligation but as a potential liability, to be managed within the closed circuit of elite decision-making.

Vietnam thus serves as both context and confirmation of the emerging doctrine of strategic silence. Just as in the Middle East crises of 1967–1968, the Johnson administration chose narrative stability over factual accountability. The cost was not only strategic failure abroad but a corrosive loss of public trust at home—a loss from which American political culture has arguably never fully recovered.

V. Race Riots and Domestic Rebellion

If the Vietnam War and foreign policy crises of 1967–1968 fractured America's image abroad, the era's urban uprisings shattered its self-image at home. The civil rights gains of the early 1960s—landmark legislation outlawing segregation and guaranteeing voting rights—had not dismantled the economic and structural barriers facing Black Americans. In the urban cores of Los Angeles, Newark, and Detroit, decades of redlining, police brutality, and economic exclusion had created conditions more akin to colonial occupation than equal citizenship.

The Watts Rebellion of 1965 had been a warning shot: six days of protest and violence after a routine traffic stop escalated into a community-wide confrontation with the police, leaving 34 dead and causing tens of millions in property damage. By the "long, hot summer" of 1967, the spark had become an inferno. Newark erupted after the beating of a Black cab driver by police; Detroit exploded after a police raid on an unlicensed bar in the heart of the Black community. Federal troops were deployed to American cities as though suppressing insurgencies in occupied territories.

The situation reached its symbolic breaking point in April 1968, with the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Within hours, over 100 American cities were in flames. The murder of the nation's most prominent advocate of nonviolent resistance exposed the fragility of the myth of national unity—the idea that America could reconcile its founding ideals with the lived reality of racial inequality without fundamental transformation.

Media coverage of these events often framed them as eruptions of "lawlessness" or "urban disorder," obscuring the systemic causes behind the unrest. The dominant narrative emphasized property damage and threats to public order, reinforcing white fears and deflecting attention from the structural violence that had produced the uprisings. For those inside the communities, the story was one of accumulated grievances, daily humiliation, and state violence—conditions in which rebellion felt less like chaos and more like survival.

Here, too, emerges the racial dimension of expendability. Just as the sailors of the USS *Liberty* and the truth of the NUMEC diversion were treated as collateral to higher strategic priorities, so too were America's Black communities deemed expendable to the preservation of the postwar order. Federal responses prioritized containment over reform, optics over justice. The uprisings were met not with a national reckoning, but with commissions, reports, and rhetorical nods to "healing," even as underlying conditions remained unchanged.

In foreign and domestic spheres alike, the governing reflex was the same: suppress the full truth, maintain the appearance of stability, and treat those bearing the brunt of systemic failures as acceptable losses in service to the broader narrative of American coherence.

VI. Strategic Silence as Imperial Doctrine

The events of 1967–1968—whether in the Gulf of Sidra, the steel mill town of Apollo, the Mekong Delta, or the streets of Detroit—were not isolated crises. They revealed a coherent governing reflex, one that can be defined as strategic silence: the deliberate suppression or reframing of politically destabilizing truths to

preserve the operational coherence of the state. This was not simple censorship. It was a systemic method of governance, developed and refined in the crucible of the Cold War, in which truth became a controlled resource, rationed to the public according to perceived strategic necessity.

Strategic silence as policy emerges when the cost of disclosure is judged greater than the cost of deception. In the case of the USS *Liberty*, acknowledging the full facts risked rupturing an alliance critical to U.S. Middle East policy. In the NUMEC affair, confronting Israeli nuclear diversion would have undermined America's nonproliferation stance while exposing its inability—or unwillingness—to police its closest partners. In Vietnam, admitting the war's futility would have meant accepting strategic defeat in a region that had been framed as a test of national will. And in the urban uprisings, telling the unvarnished truth about systemic racism threatened the myth of a postwar democracy that had solved its "race problem."

This suppression of contradiction functioned as a mechanism of control. By ensuring that competing truths—whether from survivors, whistleblowers, or rebellious communities—never gained authoritative legitimacy, the state could preserve its preferred narrative. Contradictions were not denied outright so much as contained within silos: classified reports, limited-scope investigations, and "fact-finding" commissions whose findings were buried or diluted. This kept the machinery of the Cold War state running without the public confronting the full extent of its moral compromises.

Cold War logic rewired the ethical core of American governance by making truth subordinate to geopolitical positioning. The existential stakes of the superpower rivalry created a permanent emergency mindset, in which every revelation was measured against the potential advantage it might give to the Soviet Union. In this calculus, the integrity of democratic transparency was expendable. The Cold War thus normalized what had once been exceptional—deliberate obfuscation in peacetime—and embedded it into the DNA of U.S. statecraft. The resulting political culture was one in which loyalty to the strategic narrative often eclipsed loyalty to the constitutional principles the nation claimed to defend.

Strategic silence did not merely hide unpleasant facts; it reshaped the boundaries of permissible thought and debate. Over time, it cultivated a public accustomed to partial truths, conditioned to accept that full disclosure was incompatible with national security. By 1968, this doctrine had become a self-sustaining feature of the American imperial order—a hidden architecture of control linking foreign policy, domestic governance, and public perception into a single system where the price of coherence was the suppression of reality itself.

VII. The Netanyahus and the Long Arc of Covert Strategy

The Netanyahu family's trajectory during and after 1967 offers a human through-line connecting the USS *Liberty* and NUMEC affairs to the later evolution of U.S.–Israel strategic coordination. Yonatan "Yoni" Netanyahu, at 21, was already an officer in Israel's elite Sayeret Matkal special forces unit during the Six-Day War. In that conflict, fought simultaneously with the *Liberty* attack, Yoni's operational world was defined by rapid, decisive action and by the principle that survival required the containment—or outright suppression—of sensitive operational information. His service in 1967 was not linked directly to the *Liberty* incident, yet he operated within the same Israeli military culture that viewed American alliance as essential, but not sacrosanct when weighed against existential national objectives.

Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu, four years younger, was still in high school during the Six-Day War, but the conflict and his brother's service were formative. After his own service in Sayeret Matkal in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he left Israel to study at MIT, immersing himself in a Western intellectual environment while retaining deep connections to Israeli security networks. The death of Yoni in 1976 during Operation Entebbe transformed Bibi's trajectory. He became not only a public spokesman for his brother's heroism but also a political operator capable of bridging American elite circles and Israeli strategic priorities.

This bridge took institutional form in 1979 with the founding of the Jonathan Institute, named after Yoni. The Institute's mission was to reframe terrorism in

global consciousness, positioning Israel as a frontline democracy in a civilizational struggle—a narrative that resonated strongly with Cold War policymakers. Conferences hosted by the Institute, particularly the 1984 Washington gathering, convened U.S. and Israeli political, military, and intelligence leaders to shape a unified rhetoric on terrorism. These forums consistently downplayed or erased earlier moments of friction, such as the *Liberty* or NUMEC, replacing them with a narrative of unbroken strategic solidarity.

Here, the ties to Zionist networks that blurred moral lines become visible. Bibi's post-Entebbe activism brought him into contact with pro-Israel political lobbies, American neoconservatives, and security professionals whose careers often depended on maintaining the façade of perfect alignment between U.S. and Israeli interests. The strategic silence surrounding the *Liberty* and NUMEC was not revisited; instead, these episodes were overwritten by a counterterrorism discourse that positioned Israel as both indispensable ally and moral exemplar.

In effect, the silences of 1967–1968 became part of the subtext of later counterterrorism rhetoric: proof that the alliance could survive—even thrive—on selective truth-telling. The price was the normalization of an unspoken understanding: in the service of shared strategic goals, uncomfortable facts could be buried, inconvenient histories rewritten, and moral compromises reframed as necessities. Through the Netanyahus' personal and institutional roles, this pattern extended from the shadow of the Six-Day War into the heart of post-Cold War security policy, binding two nations in a long arc of covert strategy where silence was as valuable as action.

VIII. Conclusion: Was the Experiment Failing?

By the end of 1968, the United States had survived every individual crisis of the previous two years—at least in the narrow sense of maintaining governmental continuity and avoiding immediate collapse of its alliances. But survival came at a cost that was less visible in the moment: the erosion of the moral foundations upon which the American project claimed to rest. The preservation of a coherent

narrative—of invincibility abroad, unity at home, and principled alliances—required a deliberate and sustained substitution of curated truths for full truths.

In this light, the USS *Liberty* and NUMEC affairs were not accidents in the structural sense. They were mirrors, each reflecting the same underlying logic: that when core strategic relationships or geopolitical narratives are at risk, the truth is expendable. The cover-ups surrounding them were not tactical missteps to be corrected later—they were integral acts of governance within a system that increasingly valued narrative control over factual accountability.

The moral cost was profound. Strategic silence may have shielded the state from short-term political crises, but it hollowed out the credibility of democratic institutions, eroding public trust and habituating both leaders and citizens to a degraded standard of truth. This corrosion was cumulative: each time a Liberty or NUMEC was buried, each time Vietnam's reality was denied, each time urban uprisings were framed as senseless disorder rather than systemic indictment, the gap widened between the ideals America professed and the practices it embraced.

These were the hidden wounds of empire—the injuries not inflicted by foreign adversaries but by the state's own refusal to speak plainly to its people. In that refusal, silence became both weapon and confession: a weapon in the service of geopolitical strategy, and a confession that the strategy could not withstand full disclosure. By the close of the 1960s, it was clear that the experiment was not failing because America had enemies abroad or unrest at home. It was failing because it had redefined success as the maintenance of an image, rather than the practice of the principles it claimed to defend.

Epilogue: *Those Who Cannot Remember the Past Are Condemned to Repeat It*

The crises of 1967–1968 have often been compartmentalized—each remembered, when remembered at all, within its own narrow frame. The USS *Liberty* is relegated to a maritime tragedy; NUMEC to a technical anomaly in nuclear accounting; Vietnam to a "quagmire" learned and supposedly avoided; the urban

uprisings to regrettable eruptions of unrest. In isolation, each event can be explained away, rationalized, or even forgotten.

But taken together, they form a pattern—a warning about what happens when a state convinces itself that truth is a liability. Strategic silence may preserve the moment, but it corrodes the future, embedding habits of deception into the DNA of governance. Those habits, once normalized, reappear in new guises, answering new crises with the same reflex: contain, reframe, deny.

The past, unexamined, becomes a reservoir of unlearned lessons. Without honest reckoning, the United States risks re-enacting the same choreography—alliances maintained at the cost of truth, domestic fractures papered over with slogans, and moral compromise justified as "strategic necessity." Memory is not merely an act of commemoration; it is a defense against repetition. And forgetting is, in the end, a choice.

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LIBERTY